

FOOTWASHING: CHURCH ORDINANCE OR CHURCH DISCIPLINE?

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[The following is from *New Testament Church Discipline* by James Crumpton, Pastor, West Side Baptist Church, P.O. Drawer 1425, Natchez, Mississippi 39121.]

"Now before the feast of the passover, when Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end. And supper being ended, the devil having now put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him; Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he was come from God, and went to God; He riseth from supper, and laid aside his garments; and took a towel, and girded himself. After that he poureth water into a bason, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith he was girded.

"Then cometh he to Simon Peter: and Peter saith unto him, Lord, dost thou wash my feet? Jesus answered and said unto him, What I do thou knowest not now; but thou shalt know hereafter. Peter saith unto him, Thou shalt never wash my feet. Jesus answered him, If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me. Simon Peter saith unto him, Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head. Jesus saith to him, He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit: and ye are clean, but not all. For he knew who should betray him; therefore said he, ye are not all clean.

"So after he had washed their feet, and had taken his garments, and was set down again, he said unto them, Know ye what I have done to you? 13 Ye call me Master and Lord: and ye say well; for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Master, have washed your feet; ye also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you. Verily, verily, I say unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord; neither he that is sent greater than he that sent him. If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them.

"I speak not of you all: I know whom I have chosen: but that the scripture may be fulfilled, He that eateth bread with me hath lifted up his heel against me. Now I tell you before it come, that, when it is come to pass, ye may believe that I am he. Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that receiveth whomsoever I send receiveth me; and he that receiveth me receiveth him that sent me." (John 13:1-20)

This is a most precious part of this Gospel of John. In John 1:11-13, we have reference to those who did and those who did not receive Him. The majority did not; the minority did. In John chapters 13 through 17, we find Him alone with His own, telling them some intimate things about their portion and privileges with Him and with each other. How wonderful to read, "having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end" (13:1).

"His love no end or measure knows, No change can turn its course; Eternally the same it flows From one eternal Source."

What footwashing is not In studying the passage of God's Word, let us notice, in the first place, what it is not teaching. Some teach that foot washing is a church ordinance, just as baptism and the Lord's Supper, and practice is as such. We doubt not their sincerity and respect their desire to obey Christ in a day when so many are so lax; yet, we are convicted and fully satisfied that they have mistaken our Lord's meaning here. The following facts prove conclusively that Jesus is not referring to literal foot washing and that he was not giving us a third church ordinance:

(1) "What I do thou knowest not now" (v. 7). The disciples certainly knew that their feet had been literally washed.

(2) The Scriptures nowhere indicate that any local church in the New Testament ever observed foot washing as a church ordinance because of this experience recorded in John 13.

(3) "If I wash thee not, thou has no part with me" (v. 8). If under these circumstances foot washing is a church ordinance, then foot washing would be a part of salvation. This is the same mistake that those who teach that baptism is essential to salvation make. There is no sacramental salvation taught in the Bible.

(4) "Know ye what I have done to you" (v. 12)? This would indicate that what Jesus was doing to them had a deep spiritual meaning of which they were unaware.

Some teach that the account in John 13:1-20 is given primarily to teach the humility of our Lord and to give us an example of how humble we should be. We know of one brother who wrote a whole book on this subject using this Scripture as the basis for the book. There is no question but that the humility of our Lord is revealed here, but it is not given primarily for this purpose. His humility was manifested throughout His entire sojourn here. "And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" (Phil. 2:8).

Others teach that this passage we are considering is given only to remind the disciples of Jesus' continuing love for them in the sad hours just prior to His crucifixion. There is no doubt that we see here a reiterated emphasis of His love for His own. But we do not believe that it is given simply to teach His love per se, but to show what His love caused Him to do for them and in turn what His love would motivate them to do for each other.

One bath -- but daily footwashing In the discussion, Jesus distinguished between being washed (bathed) and needing the feet washed. He was saying that there is one bath and many foot washings. The whole picture is that of the public baths. When they walked from the bathing place home, they contracted dust (since they wore sandals) and so the practice of foot washing. Hosts and hostesses washed the feet of their guests as a gesture of genuine hospitality when folk came to visit them. Thus, we read: "Let not a widow be taken into the number under threescore years old, having been the wife of one man, Well reported of for good works; if she have brought up children, if she have lodged strangers,

if she have washed the saints' feet, if she have relieved the afflicted, if she have diligently followed every good work" (1 Tim. 5:9-10). Here Paul was speaking of the requirements for widows who were to be counted worthy to be placed on the list of those supported by the local churches; one thing was that she was to have "washed the saints' feet." In other words, a widow of genuine hospitality!

Now, what is the spiritual application? The bath once for all refers to the once for all cleansing in the Precious Blood of Calvary. "Jesus saith to him, He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit: and ye are clean, but not all. For he knew who should betray him; therefore said he, Ye are not all clean" (13:10-11). The disciples had been washed (bathed); that is with one exception. You see, Judas Iscariot was never saved; he had not been washed (bathed). He was a devil, a lost man all the way. Before him lay "the blackness of darkness for ever." His heart was harder than the nether millstone, and his conscience was seared with a red-hot iron. He was not a lamb of the Lord becoming unclean, but a dog returning to his vomit.

The act of foot washing was symbolic of that which ever will be necessary, the cleansing of defilement contracted by the way. We are pilgrims, and in our daily walk we become defiled. In John 12, we are pointed to the feet of our Lord; His were anointed feet. As He passed through this world, He contracted no defilement. When He went away, He was still like He was when He came: "holy, harmless, and undefiled." The "feet" speak of the walk. As His feet were anointed with spikenard, we are reminded of the sweet savour which ever ascended from Him to the Father. In John 13, the feet of the disciples were washed. In contrast to their Lord, the disciples were defiled, and the dirt must be removed.

The blood is applied once and for all, and we are saved forever. "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin" (I John 1:7). "For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified" (Heb. 10:14). The New Testament knows nothing of a re- application of the blood. We do not come again or anew to the fountain which has been opened for sin. Sins which are contracted after being saved--defiled feet in the way--are cleansed by the washing of the Water of the Word. "That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word" (Eph. 5:26).

So, being washed (bathed) and cleansed by the blood is a once for all transaction. It has to do with our position in Christ. Foot washing is a daily thing. We are cleansed from the defilement of the daily walk. It has to do with our fellowship with Him. When Jesus said to Peter, "If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me" (v. 8), He was referring to fellowship. The word "part" is a word for "fellowship."

In the tabernacle there was the altar of burnt offering first. That pictures Calvary in the New Testament where we receive the once for all cleansing in the Blood (washed or bathed according to John 13). Then, there was the laver; at the laver the priests washed their hands and their feet in water. This pictures the daily cleansing of defiled feet (foot washing in John 13) by the water of the Word in the New Testament. The priests washed

their hands and their feet. Jesus washed His disciples' feet only. If the walk be right, the work will be acceptable. So for us, it is the daily washing of the feet (cleansing in our daily walk) by the water of the Word.

Foot washing refers to church discipline In another chapter [referring to Crumpton's book New Testament Church Discipline, of which this article forms the final chapter], we discussed Personal Church Discipline. Foot washing is applicable here because as we read and obey the Word, we are cleansed from the defilement of the way. "Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way? by taking heed thereto according to thy word" (Psa. 119:9).

We wash the brethren's feet as we preach the Word--that is, except those who draw their feet back under the pew and refuse to have them washed. This is Constructive Church Discipline. Through the preaching and applying of the journey through the wilderness of this godless world. The same is true as our teachers teach the Word. We must be careful in washing the feet of the brethren; some are guilty of using either scalding water or ice water. Sometimes the preacher and teacher get the devil in them trying to get him out of somebody else. Too, we must also beware of the self-righteous who are ready and anxious to lift up the skirts of a brother to point out his need of a foot washing. Foot washing must be done in love, patience, longsuffering, and genuine brotherly concern. "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted. Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:1-2).

And this is Punitive Church Discipline. We certainly must be emptied of all sense of self-superiority before we can restore a brother whose feet need washing. It is the love of the Lord which must constrain us. He tells us to wash one another's feet and to love one another. We need much patient forbearing with our brother's faults.

We are neither to ignore church discipline (foot washing) and hide our faces from sins with which we need to deal, calling evil good, nor are we to look on our brethren with Pharisaic complacency and cold indifference drawing our robes of self-righteousness about us.

Much exercise and searching of soul and much judging of ourselves are needed for such lowly work as foot washing, because we have to get down to our brother's feet, if we are to wash them. This means that our flesh is to be subdued.

When Jesus washed the disciples' feet, He wiped them with a towel. When we discipline a brother, and he is restored to fellowship with the Lord and his church family, we are to count it as past and remember it against him no more. Amen and amen!!!

Conclusion: Foot washing is not a church ordinance; it is church discipline!